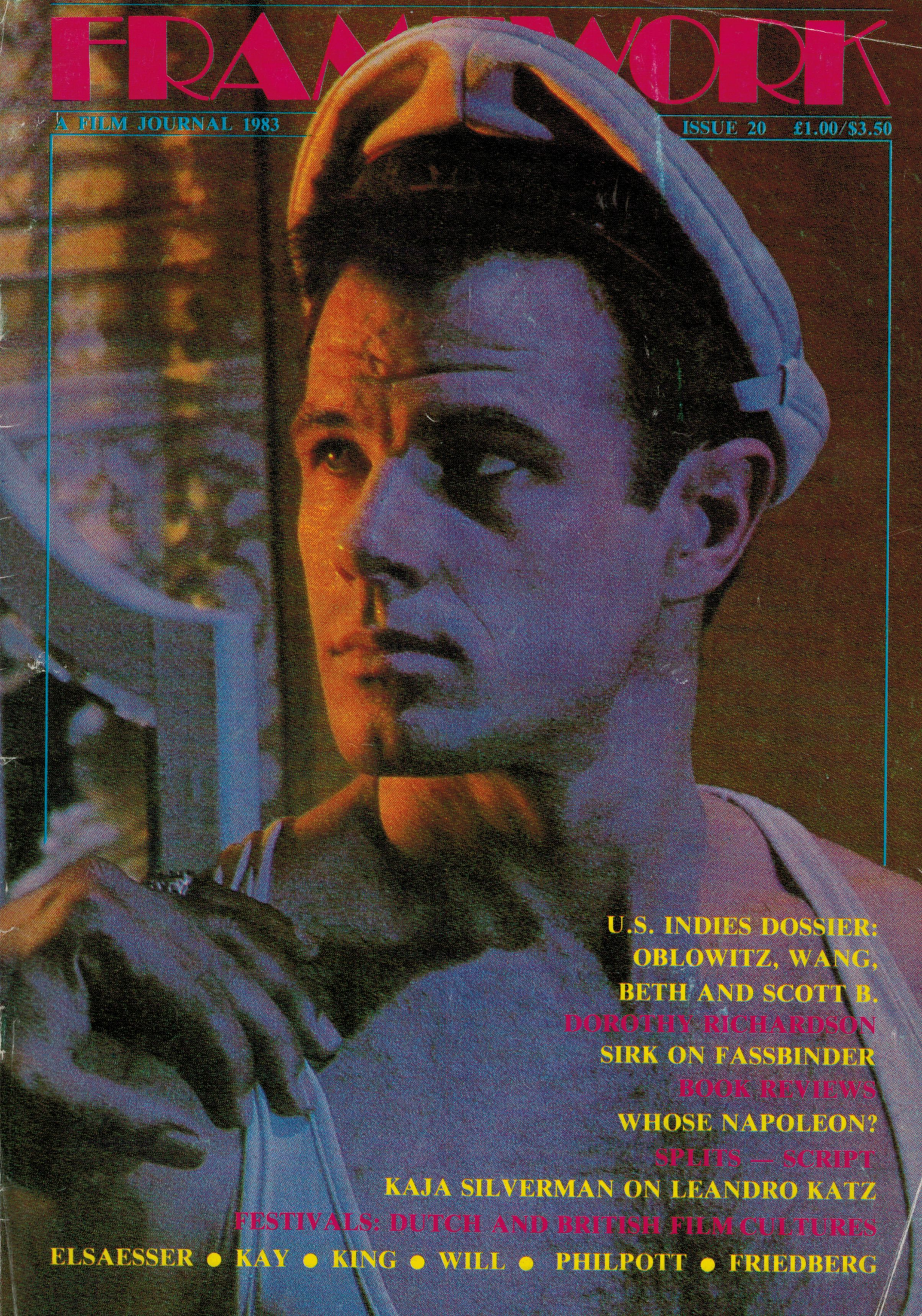


# FRAMEWORK

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**SIRK ON FASSBINDER**

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**ELSAESSER ● KAY ● KING ● WILL ● PHILPOTT ● FRIEDBERG**

**Introduction**

*These notes represent a reconstruction of an article originally presented by Richard Philpott which arose out of a feeling of anger which resulted from the manner in which the film Napoleon, as a satellite for a major intervention by dominant institutions into film history, criticism, education and cinematic representation/culture in general, was received, restored, reconstituted and re-presented following its 'success' at the 1980 London Film Festival. What is presented here is a detailed, if eclectic, network of references deliberately or otherwise elided by the Napoleon-Machine, and the general tenets of what may be termed the teleological school of film history. Some of the more apparent premises for debate and confrontation have already been satisfactorily explored in Framework 14 by Charles Barr, Philip Simson and James Leahy in a section aptly entitled 'In Defence of Film Theory'.*

"Representation requires an opposition between the categories of presence and absence and yet, at the same time, appears to circumvent that opposition in claiming that representation is indeed the rendering present of that which is absent — the represented. If this were so, it would be the represented which controls the process of its own representation: the relationship between representation and represented is, in such a view, conceived as analogous to that between appearance and essence or between image and reality. It is, in short, part of that system of 'violent hierarchies' constitutive of Western logocentrism. And, again, it implies that-which-is-represented exists independently of — and unsullied by — the action of the means of representation."

Jacques Derrida

**1. Teleological Historiography and the Restoration of Napoleon**

In constructing film history in terms of a linear, teleological development, a history of 'firsts' and validation of 'masterpieces' in technical and aesthetic invention which lead ineluctably toward the constitution of the developed codes of cinematic narrative (Burch's 'Institutional Mode of Representation') in the early 1930s, the Kevin Brownlow/William K. Everson school of historiography is paradoxically a-historical in its approach. It is the construction of an 'idealist' history, a backward projection which fails to take account of the fact that the institution of the cinema is embedded in a wider social/cultural matrix out of which and within which it has developed. The alternative (suppressed) view of history suggests that cinema developed as a highly complex and contradictory social formation in response to conflicting cultural traditions, social pressures and industrial interests. The establishment of the cinema as an institution, which in Metz's terms is not simply the

## WHOSE NAPOLEON?

film industry but also the mental machinery,<sup>1</sup> the other industry, which spectators accustomed to films have historically interiorised and enables them to consume cinematic narrative, in the light of such histories, appears neither necessary nor inevitable. At different stages in its history, conventionally charted, the cinema has offered alternatives to institutional development; in an evolution neither uniform nor linear between 1896 and 1920 and in the traditions of the avant-garde.

Brownlow's particular version of teleological film history places Gance's *Napoleon* at the pinnacle of the development of the 'art' of silent cinema, the validation of a 'masterpiece' elided by previous 'incomplete' histories. Gance's Polyvision represents for Brownlow the silent cinema at its most elegaic, a cinema which was 'betrayed' in the coming of sound. The question is how to read Brownlow's history, for in pitting the individual Gance (and Polyvision) against the industry (M.G.M. and sound) he might seem to be suggesting that Gance represents an alternative to the dominant mode of representation. The problem crystallises around Brownlow's insistence that (1) there is a radical break between silent and sound cinema and (2) Gance emerges from the 'mainstream' tradition of silent cinema and not from the tradition of the avant-garde. Brownlow's untheorised commitment to an ill defined aesthetic of the silent cinema leaves him blind to the

### 2. History and Popular Memory

In the EFF magazine 1977 Foucault points out how, before 1968, 'popular memory' considered political struggles as part of folklore but after 1968 these struggles found a sympathetic response and became a *possibility* for action. However this possibility and 'updating' of 'popular memory' was soon combated by historical interpretations produced by the mass (bourgeois-controlled) media "in order to show that they [the 1968 struggles] never really happened".<sup>2</sup> Film offers the opportunity, according to Keith Tribe<sup>3</sup>, to 'reorganise' a 'popular memory'. The uncritical response to *Napoleon* suggests that Gance's image of the hero is justified, and possibly more than simply justified by virtue of the very methods that Gance employed to represent *Napoleon*. The 'butchers' of the Revolution, having inspired Napoleon, are finally and easily overcome by his 'natural' individual talents as a leader and so he replaces them as he rises to his 'rightful' position. In Gance's own practice of representation as analysed by Welsh and Kramer: "One must rise to the level of the heroes one wants to depict."<sup>4</sup> In relation to Gance's *Beethoven* (1938) they suggest that his "attitude towards the composer is summarised at the beginning of the film: The son of a drunken father and a servant-girl mother, Beethoven soared from his environment to become the great



Napoleon

ideological dimension of the writing out of Gance in the teleological histories. Furthermore, his own 'writing in' of Gance as *the* master of the silent cinema acts as a recuperation of the Gance of the avant gardes. His aesthetic is ranged not against the 'institutional mode of representation' (fully established before the coming of sound) but against the sound industry, and while the possibilities for the avant-gardes could be seen to have been historically contained, indeed temporarily destroyed, by the dominance of the diegetic sound track and re-inforcement of a realist aesthetic (as perhaps is the case with Gance), Brownlow instead situates Gance as the last master of the art and tradition of the silent cinema destroyed by sound. This questionable placement of Gance in film history has the ideological effect of rendering neutral the importance of Gance's alternative to the dominant mode of representation without appearing to do so.

liberator of music. At the crest of his career, tragedies which might have quenched the fire in lesser mortals served only to fuel his boundless genius. In his youth, Beethoven was notorious for his ribaldry, his lusts and his loves. But only two passions did he remain faithful to until the end — his music and his love for Juliette ...” And furthermore: “Like Napoleon, Beethoven is portrayed as a kind of World Historical Individual, the Great Man in Hegelian terms, whose task it is to force material reality towards some higher expression of the spirit ... The materialist world view of the 17th century reduced the artist's role to a merely biographical one: he expressed his personal feelings or reflected his environment. Gance's portrayal of the artist — like his portrayal of the hero in general — is a manifesto against such a limited view of the Great Man.”

Welsh and Kramer's suggestion that Gance's work, in its development of a Romantic and heroic *narrative* (though, they admit, limited by melodrama) is in active opposition to a 'materialist

world view' is clearly justified. However, their valorization of the films in these terms rests on an extremely impoverished understanding of the possibilities of materialist analysis. In both *Beethoven* and *Napoleon*, Gance demonstrates how the strength of each genius lies within, and has always done so since childhood, merely struggling against a barrage of fools and exploiting circumstances. In the quoted interview, Gance states how insignificant are details of 'truth' in his cinema, which are manipulated to serve the purpose of revealing the Truth of his subjects felt 'intuitively' by Gance — though, as Welsh and Kramer point out, this is frequently based on research! Nevertheless, Welsh and Kramer minimise this 'valid criticism' of Gance's historical distortion, conveniently willing to adopt the notion that "perhaps there are two orders of genius": one which is unaware of itself and Gance's which is, thus eliding all manner of coherent criticism in the light of higher moral purpose.<sup>5</sup> At the end of his article, Keith Tribe concludes: "The combination of a historicism with film often results in a humanism which constructs historical narrative as the actions of historical persons" and "... in film, historicism and humanism become complementary problems: the attempt to realise a history progresses rapidly to a humanism as its support in which the person is the bearer of the history, the visible agent of historicity, in whose actions are inscribed the truth of the past". The effectiveness of technology to 'realise' this narrative 'truth' through film is undeniable and this is what we are invited to do in the case of *Napoleon* — to marvel at how 'modern' and 'advanced' is the film's technique. Let us also remember the overwhelming nationalistic temperament which fires Napoleon, the fated eagle, born to lead men and rule (as the film in its present form demonstrates). The film ends (long before the hero becomes the tyrant of Europe — tyrants are those that he has effectively replaced!) as he stands victorious after taking Italy. Unfortunately Gance was never to complete his mammoth project of a film of Napoleon's entire career (though his failure to do so — recalling *Greed* as it does — certainly makes the recent project easier for today's *Napoleon* promoters). What remains is the first of a projected series of six films, itself originally in three parts: The Youth of Bonaparte, Bonaparte and the French Revolution, The Italian Campaign.

### 3. Thames T.V. and the Ideology of Re(-)Presentation

Thames TV's decision to back Brownlow's project certainly rests on his successful work for them to date (especially the 'Hollywood' series) but also on the novelty of Gance's original enterprise, Polyvision, in which three projectors simultaneously, and synchronously, project onto three screens to create panoramic/Scope and triptych effects. The money which originally made *Napoleon* is not, of course the same money that made Brownlow's *Napoleon* and this reinvestment in cinema history not only validates Gance and *Napoleon* in film history, but the institution of television itself. We are led to recognise the technological 'supremacy' of television as inheritor, the linear development towards technological innovation as the bearer of historically worthwhile fruits.<sup>6</sup>

Even if *Napoleon*'s Polyvision was pipped at the post by *The Jazz Singer*'s synchronised sound<sup>7</sup>, the investment of Thames TV in the project suggests that if the technological and aesthetic developments during the silent era were such that the cinema industry could not keep up (and, indeed MGM removed Polyvision's threats to their profits<sup>8</sup>) then a new picture industry, television, was necessitated which could. Television's investment in and appropriation of *Napoleon* not only gives that institution a place in a film history but reinforces Brownlow's project of recuperating Gance (and his method of writing and presenting film history) at the institutional level. Channel 4's projected broadcasting of the film places such a screening within our 'integral state', which is, as Gramsci puts it "the entire complex of political and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules".<sup>9</sup>

Jean-Louis Comolli using Marcelin Pleyne<sup>10</sup> points out how, far from being devoid of ideological contamination the camera is "built on the model of the scientific (i.e. monocular) perspective of the Quattrocento", photography taking on the mantle of a representational aesthetic at the moment that painting was becom-



*Napoleon*

ing aware that it was enclosed in a specific cultural system and seeking alternatives. The panoramic effect developed by Gance appears to reinforce perspective in triplicate as it is suddenly projected onto the screen, widening the field of monocular vision in much the same way as Scope was later to do when the film industry felt severely threatened by television. However Gance was most interested in the triptych effects in *Napoleon* which challenge the dominance of narrative in favour of the 'poetic': "The scenes in Polyvision were very important to me because that was where I wanted the writing of cinema to begin. When one sees scenes in Polyvision on a big screen, a kind of psychic flash of lightening takes place between the separate images, between the central image and other images, which multiplies the force of what you see. Let me explain: if you see the images from left to right, one after another, you add their force; with Polyvision you multiply that force. As a result you lose the critical sense. *For me a spectator who maintains his critical sense is not a spectator. I wanted the audience to come out of the theatre amazed victims, completely won over, emerging from paradise to find, alas the hell of the street. That is the cinema!*"<sup>11</sup>

The fact that Polyvision proved antithetical to the coming of sound should be perceived in the context of Godard's demonstration of the effectiveness of Hollywood capital's manipulative power via the additional 'realism' provided by synchronised sound. Polyvision inevitably lost out for sound equipment could be universally introduced into cinemas and justify extensive commercial research into its possibilities whereas Gance's experiment was founded on more personal, individual experimentation threatening an unhomogenised, and thus too uncentralised and unstandardised, development of film technology. Comolli redefines the development of synchronised sound as the coming of (bourgeois) speech (parole), the discourse of the subject. Christopher Williams adds that "speech re-inducts the ideological systems of recognition, the spectacle, the versimilitude". Further, he writes, "scientificity of the technical instruments of that invention and their subsequent development .. (inscription into practice) ... tends to head off and neutralise consideration of the social/ideological/economic determinants in filmic writing and

the processes of film production... The principal ideological function of film, then, is to reassure, by the use of 'neutral' and 'technical' means, the bourgeoisie and all those under bourgeois domination that the world *is* the same as it *looks*."<sup>12</sup>

It is ironic that *Napoleon* should be made visible through the institution of television, a medium supremely unsuitable for Gance's innovation — even more so than the 'average' TV use of cinema's now customary Panavision/CinemaScope processes. This irony is compounded in view of the fact that it seems likely that the triptych innovation which gives *Napoleon* its 'value' is likely to be omitted when broadcast, just as when originally distributed by M.G.M. in the United States in a heavily cut, single screen, version.

#### 4. Knowledge, Power and Semiotics

That the silent era should suddenly have gained such 'popular' appeal, or rather, have become so important to the mass media and bourgeois institutions, at a time when the West is faltering on the Reagan-Thatcher axis, becomes apparent in the light of Comolli's thoughts<sup>13</sup> on "the long gestation period of the cinema" which he considers to be widely studied but poorly understood: "the haven and source of strength for the majority of fantasies and myths current in the cinema". He refers us to Bazin's suggestion that "the origins of an art allow one to see something of its essence...", an 'essence' which is "already in the realm of mythology". This is a position that the work of Brownlow for Thames Television has helped to confirm, especially through his persistent use both on film, television and in his writing, of interviews with witnesses who 'prove', by their words in quotation marks or their lip-synchronised appearances on the screen, that the formative years of the cinema in which they worked were *really* mythical! So the myth is perpetuated and reinforced as it becomes humanised. As Mick Eaton observes: "When we peer beneath the surface of decontextualised and anecdote that forms the veneer of his (Brownlow's) own particular practice it becomes clear that what he so disparages is any attempt to understand and to theorise the relationship between the changing forms of film ... and changes of the technology and institutional forms .. of the cinema. The unquestioning attitudes to the forms of the early cinema is reproduced in the use of forms of television in the Hollywood series. From the use of the authenticating voice of the traditional commentator to the tantalising brevity of the film clips shown, and the use of interviews cut into fragments which may only serve as a confirmation of what we have already seen and heard — every element of the programme serves to confirm the naturalness of the cinematic institution and our love of it remains uncompromised."<sup>14</sup> Considering the teaching of film history John Ellis notes that: "the aesthetic of archiving policies...; the promotional role of film critics; the industry's own conception of artistic merit and the use-value of films; the fetishism inherent in the activities of certain film historians [in which he pointedly includes Brownlow] as well as more general ideologies of history" are included within this discipline, further noting that "knowledge is ... a function of problematics rather than of the clear vision of the (voyeuristic) analyst(s) towards the world. The empiricist is therefore revealed as a repression of these questions in favour of placing the analyst in such a voyeuristic position. As a result connections can be made with the critique of the ideology of the visible and of vision upon which cinema trades."<sup>15</sup>

Taking Bazin's arguments forward Comolli points out that although everything that was needed was to hand, Marey and Albert Londe, both scientists, saw little interest in developing cinema since it offered no escape from the illusions of our eyes and hence no advantage in projecting onto the screen life as it is seen. The paradoxical difficulty of establishing a means of representation, photography, with both the ability to record 'scientific truth' and to provide an illusionary art was largely overcome through the power of legislation and the establishment of a number of powerful restrictive institutions at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> According to Comolli, the 'invention' of the photograph "is a development which backs up the eye by perpetuating its principles of representation of the world and the codes constructed on the standards of its 'normality', but which at the same time undermines the hegemony of the eye and transcends it" and "it was under the impact of an economic demand and as an ideological in-

strument that the cinema was conceived, made and bought from start to finish". In the same essay, Comolli quotes Serge Daney: "(The cinema) postulates that from the 'real' to the visual and from the visual to its reproduction on film, the same truth is reflected infinitely without a distortion or loss" (ie. relieving the mechanisms of cinema production from any ideological complicity), a position which Comolli compares with Derrida's assertion that "in a world where 'I see' is automatically said for 'I understand' such a fantasy has probably not come about by chance. The dominant ideology which equates the real to the visible has every interest in encouraging it..."<sup>17</sup>

The same applies to teleological representations of film history where, as Sam Rhodie, observes, opposition becomes a "methodological inconvenience blocking the project of history". He goes on to point out that semiotics has altered "notions of the development of cinema, its history, and constitutes a major critique of the practice by film historians of the creation of an autonomous history of the cinema, as it does a critique of an autonomous aesthetic theory of cinema"... "the historical discipline is located as an ideological practice, whereas the semiological one has, in part, as project the disclosure of ideology".<sup>18</sup>

Semiotics, then, appears an inevitable thorn in the flesh of a historian such as Brownlow, and in his now notorious piece first printed in the *New Statesman*<sup>19</sup> he criticises semiological writing principally, it seems, from a deep-seated fear of analysis which also pervades his writings and television presentations<sup>20</sup> and his own films.<sup>21</sup> First of all, Mr. Brownlow is violently opposed to the inroads such analysis has made in education. According to Brownlow, semiotics loses credence because there is no training for teaching in film and that, therefore, those who do so are tempted to take refuge in a "smokescreen of jargon" which is uncommunicative. The youthfulness of film teaching, then, has created a variety of theoretical work which outstrips the opinionated film reviews on the 'common sense' level that Mr. Brownlow calls for; and students and teachers who, because of the complexities of attempts to forge oppositional tools of analysis, are less frequently required to study a neatly-presented package describing precisely what film is and explaining how the cinema works. In other words, Mr. Brownlow would sooner refuse to recognise the problems of this most complex 'medium' in favour of forcing the roots of the problems deeper by wilful ignorance.

Of course, the basic assumption of such an attack on film studies is that film makers, those who *do*, who *create*, *know*. Other, lesser, mortals — teachers, theoreticians — don't. Whilst the tones of a Brownlow may be personal, the voice is the repressive voice of the institution. Be it that of Hollywood, Wardour Street, or the BBC, this voice tells us that this is the right way to do it, that this is wrong; that this is entertaining, or informative, that not; these are professionals; those dilettantes; this attracts an audience, that doesn't. Many film makers as well as teachers and theoreticians question whether a consensus on such issues any longer exists, or would be meaningful if it did. This is not just a theoretical issue, as James Leahy points out: "There is not just one right way to make a newsreel, or a documentary, or any other kind of film; each way generates its own results, producing different kinds of understanding and involvement, appreciated by different kinds of audience. Choice is possible, if the institutions allow space for it."<sup>22</sup>

In his reply to Brownlow, Robert Stam, teacher at the Cinema Studies Department of New York University, makes the point clear: "Impressionistic criticism, blind to *its* ideology and to the subsurface rigidity of its assumptions, projects that rigidity onto its hated other: semiology. But at its best, semiology like Marxism, is deeply subversive of common-sense ways of thinking." Brownlow writes, "Academics know that the film industry thrived without anyone (but the fans) studying film, so they have divorced themselves from the language and concerns of that industry. It didn't need them; they don't need it." This raises all manner of issues which, of course, Mr Brownlow, who has made a living out of being a film fan, chooses to ignore, thus accepting the filmic results of the varied dominant, political, economic and cultural forces at work in cinema without question or analysis. In attempting to supply oppositional tools of analysis, semiology threatens the forces of the 'critical' (ie. uncritical) establishment (such as Brownlow) that perpetuate dominant modes of representation.

This is one precise reason why those who chose to analyse film semiologically are "divorced from the concerns" of that industry (in Brownlow's opinion) since, ideologically, they threaten the forces that perpetuate its dominant modes of representation. Assuming that those filmmakers influenced by semiology are therefore equally "divorced from the language and concerns of that industry" we must presume that Mr Brownlow dismisses the work of everyone from Godard to Le Grice as being semiologically contaminated and therefore alien to cinema as a whole? Indeed, Mr. Brownlow has very strict ideas about education in general and about relatively modern disciplines in particular: "But the people who apply it to films are neither psychoanalysts nor social scientists," he writes in alarm. It seems that in Mr. Brownlow's book *everyone* must be trained according to some easily discernable system (the state education system) in some specific function before they can fulfil that role.

He is at his most demonstrative, if at his most confused, when he brings the bogey-man of politics into the arena. He aligns the growth of a cult of semiologists with fascism, forcing "people of one discipline to learn the language of another" while pointing out that these semiologists are "regrettably usually left-wing" and really "quite aggressively Marxist — which makes the whole situation more alarming". It is not then, he seeks to assure us, left-wing politics of Marxism which he attacks but the *radical* nature of semiology, since he assumes that the radical are somehow incapable of speaking outside of what he assumes is an inflexible doctrine. To Brownlow, semiology is a 'disease' — like communism and socialism, no doubt — and we must learn to *choose* (in an under-funded film industry) *between* "a series of courses on Christian Metz, with diagrams — or *another* film by Bill Douglas" (my emphasis). For many, there is as little to be gained from either, but for Brownlow, the possibility of practice, theory and criticism co-existing is unthinkable (other than in an historical view?). As Mike Westlake points out in his clear and precise reply to the New Statesman article, Brownlow is opposed to students being supplied with a tool with which to "master meaningful concepts which can then be applied to produce knowledge and enact change", once more underlining Brownlow's aversion to change and, possibly, his awareness that an equation exists between knowledge and power.

### 5. Napoleon in Performance

Brownlow's *personal* account of his struggle and triumph in reconstructing *Napoleon* is recorded in a cover article of the Observer colour magazine, and months later it is finally announced that it will be shown, though only once, at the 1980 LFF. (Brownlow's epic tale has also been printed, with slight variations, in a large number of cinema journals.) Every seat was sold within an hour of tickets going on sale. Enquirers pressing for further screenings were answered with resigned negative responses at both the NFT and BFI. Whether or not this suggests salesman's strategy to boost huge demand into overwhelming demand we may never know, but four months later three more exclusive and luxurious screenings were announced — to take place, as before, at the Empire, Leicester Square, but instead of *all* seats being £7, as at the LFF, these now *range* from £10 to £17 and another print is simultaneously breaking all box office records as Radio City in New York.

Let us take a closer look at the manner of re-presentation. In his introduction to the coffee table book to accompany the TV series and exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Brownlow writes, "Condemned as we are to view the cinema of the past through a glass darkly, what hope have future generations of seeing the films as they were meant to be seen? Very little." Though an admirable realisation by Mr. Brownlow, he still presumes some ultimately 'correct' way of presenting, and thus of re-presenting, these films. By the same virtue, perhaps we 'ought' to see, or be able to see, altarpieces in the churches that commissioned them, preferably accompanied by a contemporary service etc? Despite these apparently insurmountable problems, however, Philip Oakes was forced to comment on the 'Hollywood' series (despite being presented on the 'small screen') in the Sunday Times that "the Brownlow-Gill version of the vintage films is almost certainly closer to the ideal than when they were first released", though James Leahy points out that this is most unlikely.



Napoleon

The Empire, Leicester Square screening approximately recreated the Paris Opera screenings of April 7, 1927 — *Napoleon* was in fact the first and only film to be shown there. Yet, perhaps here too Brownlow's 'historical' 'perfection' exceeds that of the original. By a remarkable coincidence, the only Polyvision triptych sequence in Brownlow's *Napoleon* shows the Entry into Italy, which Gance originally intended to be the only sequence with the new panoramic technique, though in the editing he found the 'poetic' experience of it so seductive that he felt compelled to give it greater exposure. Unfortunately, despite having noted Gance's difficulty in concealing the orchestra at the Opera performance, Brownlow appeared to have completely overlooked this self-evident problem at the Empire, effectively providing the orchestra with a 'space' equal to that occupied by the film! But what really prevented future screenings from having been accompanied by a synchronised soundtrack recorded at the LFF performance?<sup>23</sup> Speculation might encompass profit, publicity, elitism, exclusivity etc.

Furthermore, the music, which has been widely applauded by Brownlow (and audiences following his example — the alternative score in the US was, in fact, nominated for an Oscar),<sup>24</sup> is a composite of unlikely musical bedfellows whose differing intentions and connotive meanings have effectively been pieced together in such a way as to reduce their meanings to utter banality — even Beethoven's *Eroica*<sup>25</sup> loses all its vital colour in the melange served up for our *consumption* in the cinema. (Difficult though it may be to follow, an argument surely exists that the orchestra's presence — so fiercely asserted — helps to 'recreate' the 'atmosphere' of 'silent' cinemas while the music played was more contemporaneous to Napoleon the man than *Napoleon* the film. Music for such large scale productions usually had *original* music written for it which, in the case of more successfully distributed films, would have been printed and circulated together with the film print and would not be reliant on the resident organist's/pianist's improvisational abilities with regard to historically appropriate music and themes. Even when the 'atmosphere' of 'silent' cinema is recreated it rarely utilises musical themes in such predictable, immobile, undeveloping form as to make them empty and banal. The

conception of leitmotiv has here reached a state of immobility that the character themes register only as stagnant repetition. The effect, then, of the music is (aurally) one of unimaginative void neither helping nor hindering the picture but simply existing for Culture Consumption (effectively 'fixing' the film), and (visually) extremely distracting and annoying.

As if these contemporary barriers between the 'original' Gance film and the 1980s audience was not enough, intervals for selling (refreshments and lavish, largely uninformative souvenirs) helped provide further distractions and split the film into four parts, rather than the original three. The exclusivity of the representation could scarcely be ignored by any who attended a screening or who would like to have done so. The expensive paraphernalia that accompanied the whole bourgeois extravaganza proves only that Mr. Brownlow hopes to effect a danger that he predicted in Autumn 1970 under the title *The Crisis We Deserve*: "Soon motion pictures will be relegated to the role of the theatre: culture for the privileged minority".<sup>26</sup> And this was how 1980 triumphed over 1927! Both dates were fixed.

## 6 Whose Napoleon

Leaving aside Brownlow's *personal* preoccupation with establishing *Napoleon* as a masterpiece of the silent era is, then, impossible. Himself fired by critic's disdain for what remained of Gance's film, Brownlow succeeded in piecing together a film, almost complete (though with much of the essential Polyvision still apparently lost) and with Gance's blessing.<sup>27</sup>

In conversation<sup>28</sup>, Brownlow admitted, 'In my work as a filmmaker I tend to reject all the values that I espouse as a historian,' clearly placing himself as a centre of contradictions which further investigation has served only to amplify. *Napoleon* is Brownlow's (and others') re-presentation of Gance's representation of 'historical' material (ie. actions re-presented as narrative facts). Brownlow's own filmmaking is also concerned with representations of history<sup>29</sup> and has simultaneously been writing and presenting film history while his collaborator, Andrew Mollo, as written on military history. Their collaboration is clearly a happy one as virtually all Brownlow's directorial work as filmmaker has dealt with representing (or re-representing) military history. The history of Brownlow's filmmaking practice, however, appears based on an extremely self-conflicting methodology which is particularly problematic when dealing with questions of realism and politics.

Indeed, Brownlow has a similar attitude to politics as that professed by television: it is acceptable if ineffectual (the failure of fascism in Britain in *It Happened Here* and the failure of communism in *Winstanley* — though admittedly at superficial levels) and editorial 'unbias' is upheld.

But what of Gance in all this? He has conveniently become mythologised, a 'living legend' whom we were invited to marvel at in respect of his age (which appeared to require as much respect as his work), his health (sickness and senility don't sell tickets) and his merely quaint desire to use the revival as an excuse to get support for another great project, this time on Christopher Columbus. It is interesting to note that on the occasion of Napoleon's birth Gance made a film, *Bonaparte and the Revolution*, on the request of Andre Malraux, from *Napoleon* footage stored in the Cinematheque Francaise. Henri Langlois originally refused to release the footage to Gance, presumably out of fear that the distorted version commissioned by Malraux would prevent the original footage from forming the basis of a complete reconstruction.<sup>30</sup> Gance's relationship to his older work is less puritanical, though he is aware of misrepresentation of it and critical of such.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say, Brownlow is very reassuring about the difficulties surrounding history and its presentation: 'The movies are the nearest we will get to H.G. Wells' 'Time Machine', he writes.

**Richard Philpott**  
(Revised and Edited by Richard Allen)

### Footnotes:

1. Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier' in *Screen* Summer 1975.
2. In *Film Language*, O.U.P., New York, 1974, Christian Metz states that: 'By its very existence, the narrative suppresses the *now* (accounts of current life) or the *here* (live television coverage), and most frequently the two together (newsreels, historical accounts etc.)' and referring to J.P. Sartre that: 'Reality does not tell stories, but memory, because it is an account, is purely imaginative'.
3. Keith Tribe, 'History and Production of Memories' in *Screen* vol.18 no.4.
4. Steven Kramer and James M Welsh, *Able Gance*, Twyane Publishers, Boston, 1978. In this context it is worth reading the final titles of the film *Napoleon*: "On that evening Bonaparte took his place in history, never to leave it again"; "Since this morning, I AM THE REVOLUTION!" and finally "On April 18, 1796, hav-



*Napoleon*

ing gone ahead of all his army and his staff he is on the heights of Montezemolo, half a mile above sea level.”; “So the beggars of Glory, their stomachs empty and their heads filled of songs, leave history for the Epic Poem”; “The soul of Napoleon, lifted up in a fantastic reverie, plays in the clouds, destroying and rebuilding worlds”; “A strange orchestra leader beats time in the sky for the march of the armies”; “THE END”.

5. A striking comparison might be made with Rossellini's position with regard to historical representations. See D. Ranvaud ed. *Rossellini*, B.F.I., 1980.

6. “Technological determinism, substitutes for the social, the economic, the ideological, proposes the random autonomy of invention and development, coupled often with the vision of a fulfilment of an abstract human essence ...” — Stephen Heath, ‘Technology as historical and cultural form’, in Heath & de Lauretis eds. *The Cinematic Apparatus*, MacMillan, 1980. “This the historical variation of cinematic techniques, their appearance-disappearance, their phases of convergence, their periods of dominance and decline seem to depend not on a rational-linear order of technological perfectability nor an autonomous instance of scientific ‘progress’, but much rather on the off-settings, adjustments, arrangements carried out by a social configuration in order to represent itself, that is, at once to grasp itself, identify itself and itself produce itself in its representation.” — J.L. Comolli, ‘Machines of the Visible’, in Heath and de Lauretis eds. op. cit.

7. The concern here is with the industrial significance of this film rather than with any sense of a ‘first’ talking picture as opposed to a ‘first’ film in polyvision. See also Gomery and Wollen in Heath & de Lauretis eds. op. cit.

8. After the film had been shown in eight European cities, M.G.M. paid \$450,000 for it, showed it complete only in London and released heavily cut and single screen prints in the U.S.A., the distributors being ‘unwilling to risk a Polyvision revolution on top of the talkie upheaval’ — K. Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By*, Secker & Warburg, 1968.

9. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1968.

10. J.L. Comolli, ‘Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field’ in *Film Reader* 2, Jan. 1977.

11. Kramer and Welsh, ‘Film as Incantation: An Interview with Abel Gance,’ *Sight & Sound* vol 45, no 2, Spring 1976. In the *Times* of 5.12.80, David Robinson records Gance's introduction to the 1977 programme: “My approach was ... i) to make the spectator become an actor ii) to involve him at every level in the unfolding of the action iii) to sweep him away on the flow of pictures.”

12. Christopher Williams, ‘Idea about Film Technology and the History of the Cinema’ B.F.I. Education Service/S.E.F.T. seminar 26 April 1973.

13. J.L. Comolli ‘Technique and Ideology’, op. cit.

14. Mick Eaton, ‘Taste of the Past: Cinema History on Television’.

15. John Ellis, ‘Film in Higher Education’ in *Screen Education* no.38.

16. J.L. Comolli in ‘Technique and Ideology’ op., cit. points out that the camera obscura was known in Egypt in 347 B.C. and was used by Arab scientists in the 9th century and that Beesy and Chardin's ‘Dictionnaire du Cinema’ details manifestations and improvements since Bacon (1260) — i.e. it was studied and handled by scientists throughout history. See also the last paragraph of ‘Rossellini and Leon Battista Alberti: The Centring Power of Perspective’, by Michael Silverman in D. Ranvaud (ed.) *Rossellini* op., cit. and, John Tagg, ‘Power and Photography’ in *Screen Education* nos.36 & 37, Autumn 1980 & Winter 1980/81.

17. Jacques Derrida, ‘Sur Salador’ in ‘Travail, Lecture, Jouissance’, *Cahiers du Cinema* no.222. See also Martin Walsh on the term ‘bourgeois illusionist cinema’ in ‘Re-Evaluating Rossellini’, *Jump Cut* no. 25, 1977, reprinted in D. Ranvaud (ed.) op., cit.

18. Sam Rhodie, ‘History and Film’, B.F.I. Educational Advisory Service/S.E.F.T Seminar, 12 April 1973.

19. Reprinted as ‘Cinematic Theology’ in *Cineaste* vol.10 no.4, Fall 1980 — and rightly decried by the editor of *Framework* and revealingly palced in the wider contexts of film criticism, theory and education by Charles Barr (Pod Persons and Sign-Systems) and Philip Simpson (Film Criticism/Film Education) in

*Framework* no.14, 1981 and by Philip Simpson, Christopher Frayling and David Will in *Framework* no.18, 1982.

20. Brownlow obsessively centres his attention on personalities and, in the case of Abel Gance (in *The Parade's Gone by*) describes him as being “rather like a medieval saint” but with a mischeivous grin! And during a tour of Gance's home, we are told of this supreme auteur's “mystical quality”. Despite Brownlow's questioning his own overflowing affection for the personalities wheeled out to prove the wonder of Hollywood's glorious past, he is finally delighted to admit that they really are wonderful (even if it was “a business that consumes people like industrial fuel”) and, of course, all Hollywood and TV is likely to agree with him since both spend so much time in self-congratulations or in congratulating one another. Cecil B. DeMille's niece, Agnes, according to Brownlow in his book *Hollywood — The Pioneers*, could only speak “pure poetry” when relating anecdotes about the early years of Hollywood and, on more than one occasion, Brownlow compares his investigations in Tinsel Town to the film *Sunset Boulevard* (fictional?). Similarly, Jeremy Isaacs (Special Consultant on ‘Hollywood’) is described by Brownlow as “Our Irving Thalberg” (the ‘Boy Wonder’ widely credited with the destruction of Stroheim's career).

21. Describing his interest in making *It Happened Here*, Brownlow says that he and Andrew Mollo were “fascinated by the unexplained elements of the Nazi phenomenon” and adds “I have never been able to analyse this”. This, unfortunately, may have set an irreversible precedent. He goes on to point out that “mystery clouded the era” adding the possibly revealing statement, “And mystery is a powerful attraction.” Small wonder that Mr. Brownlow feels such aversion for the analytical work of film semiologists.

22. James Leahy, from the longer version of a paper printed as ‘Brownlow's *Hollywood* and Film Theory’, *Framework* 14, 1981.

23. Thames recorded the music at the LFF screening for use on television at a cost of \$50,000 — *Variety* 3.12.80

24. Music was written and conducted by Carmine Coppola (the father of Francis Ford Coppola) and the tickets ranged in price from \$10 to \$25, sponsored in this case by the Film Society of the Lincoln Center in association with the Department of Film of the Museum of Modern Art and screened at the Radio City Music Hall. In his article ‘The Superimposition of Vision: Napoleon and the Meaning of Fascist Art’, *Cineaste* vol.11 no.2, Peter Pappas accuses Coppola's score or being “almost equal to sabotage”, “subversive” of the film and “practically negates its visual lucidity”.

25. The manuscript of the ‘Eroica’ originally carried the composers dedication to Napoleon but was later violently scratched out by Beethoven when Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor. N.B. Note also that the music included *parts* of Honnigar's score for the 1927 screening.

26. In *Sight and Sound* vol.35 no.4 Autumn 1970.

27. A version of 5 hours 58 minutes was screened in Gance's presence at the Telluride Film Festival in September 1979, though still with about 20 minutes missing according to Brownlow.

28. *Film Comment* vol.16 no.3, pp.8-9, May-June 1980.

29. *The Capture* (1955) from a Maupassant story of the Franco-Prussian War.

*It Happened Here* (1964) representing England under Nazi occupation during World War Two.

*Winstanley* (1975) charting the rise and fall of Gerrard Winstanley's pre-communist Diggers at the end of the English Civil War.

30. Gance claimed to have destroyed some of the climatic Polyvision — enough to enable us to understand Langlois' reluctance to let him have the remaining precious footage deposited at the Cinematheque. It should also be noted here that Gance makes an emphatic distinction between Bonaparte the Republican and Napoleon the Emperor. The distinction, he says, is proven in his sound film *Bonaparte and the Revolution* where the texts of the revolutionaries are matched with scenes from *Napoleon*. The latter film, Gance now considers, to be no more important than ‘the framework which I used to make the later film.’ See Kramer & Welsh op., cit.

31. In his interview with Kramer and Welsh op., cit. Gance began “There is an Arab proverb which says: ‘You are the master of the word you have not said. The word you have said is your master.’”